Lost Years

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"The years I studied at university were years when student and labour unrest came to the fore, when political instability prevailed, and moreover, when the order evolved into chaos. I will never forget this famous quote of Karaoğlan. ‘If you don't come down from the stands to the field, I'm afraid someone will come out, blow the whistle and say “the game is over, everyone go home”.’ As a matter of fact, no one came down from the stands, someone came out and blew the whistle. The game was over and everyone went home. The military coup took place and the events, in which more than ten people were dying every day, ended in an instant, as if cut with a knife. Everyone was happy about this. From then on, students and workers gave up their places on the stage to others.

As if giving a lecture, our old friend summarised that period, which was initially welcomed by the public.

"In short, after the coup, the constitution was amended with a very large participation, the state's power of control was increased, individual rights and freedoms were restricted. Political parties were dissolved, political bans were imposed on party leaders. Many writers, journalists and academics were detained and penalised. Freedom of the press was severely restricted. Torture, imprisonment and executions became synonymous with the coup period. There were dark days in terms of human rights violations. Military tutelage continued its influence

in politics and social life for many years. The transition to a free market economy was accelerated. During the state of emergency, the country's relations with the West strengthened, but domestic repression also led to international criticism.

On that day, our old friend was frequently making flashbacks in a chain of memories that at first seemed complicated to us.

"A few years before the coup, when I graduated, I had to find a job because my student loan payments have ended. . I went up to the editor-in-chief of the newspaper with a note like ‘The bearer is to be trusted’ and a strong backing like ‘The bearer card is my relative’. The man had an impressive personality with his gigantic appearance. He later became an MP and a minister in a government. I knew his brother from my university years. Interestingly, the younger brother had said in his fast days, ‘I am ashamed to have such an elder brother’, and for this reason he had changed his name to refer to the October Revolution. Later in life, the younger brother left politics and became an environmentalist. Then the eternal enmity between the brothers ended, they reconciled. And, recently, they passed away a few months apart.

"The owner of the workplace, it doesn't matter whether he shares their ideology or not, had completely handed over the management of his newspaper to a political party. Thus it became a vehicle through which

only the voice of that nationalist, statist and conservative party could be heard. On that day, I quickly got to know two university graduates working in the proofreading service, who were sent back from the typesetting department to be re-typeset by correcting language mistakes in the articles. One of them, with his academic career, eventually became a lecturer and dean at various universities. Almost forty years later, during an epidemic of anxiety and fear, I learnt that he had died in a hospital in a city far from his hometown.

"However, shortly after I took the job, the director of the newspaper changed and was replaced by a slant-eyed man. After the military coup, while everyone was arrested, he disappeared. It was only 30 years later, when he was arrested and imprisoned on charges of ‘membership of an armed terrorist organisation’ and ‘political and military espionage’, if I remember correctly, for other activities, that the rumours that he had once been an intelligence officer came true.

"About a month after I joined my unit to do my military service in the east, far away from the city, I was warned by some regular officers. A letter from the personnel affairs office informed the battalion commander that I had been ‘actively involved in left-wing activities’. This information did not remain secret. However, since the group of lieutenants I hung out with was conservative, it was not taken seriously by anyone except my unit

commander, of course. Only he treated me as an “objectionable infantryman” until the day I was demobilised.

After a short break, our old friend, as if he was the product of a scattered mind, was talking about the big city he had visited again after many years, and I don't think he was exaggerating, but he couldn't help expressing the emotional aspects of his memories.

"In the provinces, when I used to recommend cities to my senior students for higher education, I used to emphasise the importance of this historical city with the following words. When you graduate from university, you get two diplomas. One is what your school gives you and the other is what the city gives you. The old capital of the past is the favourite not only of poets but also of everyone indiscriminately with the boundlessness of its rich dreams.

"More than forty years ago, when I was a student and travelled around the city step by step, I used to imagine that I was living in a magical world. As life experiences accumulated, one by one the magic was broken, and whatever we call reality came to the fore as painful. However, the historical aspect of the city, which constitutes an exception, has preserved its place in our minds nostalgically.

"That day, as I walked the one-and-a-half kilometres from one end to the other of the street, which

was closed to vehicular traffic except for a tramway that opened onto the famous square and kept the old times alive, I gawked at my left and right as if I was seeing it for the first time. I knew that this street had been named Freedom Street about 100 years ago. Although this name was given to express the liberation of the city from the enemy, it had always carried a different meaning for me. I used to think of the freedom of a mind free from prejudgements, as if this was an exceptional place representing a universal point of view. It was cosmopolitan. In a crowd of people of all types, it was a place that made you forget the feeling of loneliness in an incomprehensible way and, in fact, a place you would not want to leave.

"While I was immersed in these dreams and thoughts, I suddenly noticed a well-dressed, gentlemanly-looking, elderly but vigorous man in the crowd, who excited me as if he had met a friend. I followed him with my eyes for maybe ten seconds until he disappeared from sight, blending in with the crowd. I thought I recognised him from somewhere. It is quite possible that I had never met him, but this face was not unfamiliar. I thought I would recognise him if I thought a little, but in vain! . . I couldn't recognise him.

As I was walking with a feeling of nostalgia, almost as if I was slowly returning to real life, I soon realised that a group of women and a smaller number of

men were passing by me in the direction I was going. Interestingly, however, one of these women also looked familiar to me. In those few seconds I was struck by the determined expression on the woman's face. Her gaze was piercing, not recognising distance. As the group disappeared among the crowd, I forgot about the woman and let myself be intoxicated by the intoxicating effect of the street again. At the kiosk on the corner, I ordered a pressed orange juice that I couldn't drink when I was a student due to lack of money. I had fun for a short while in front of a couple of cinemas that still survived the passage of time. I got stuck in the shop window of a store whose fame has spread abroad and looked at the clothes on the mannequins for a while and lived the past with longing. Then, I let myself go again to the flood of people on the street, which was not at all disturbing for me. I confess, I was happy.

"This time, jumping from branch to branch, my attention was drawn to a crowd further on, towards the end of “Freedom”. I soon realised that the group that had passed me earlier had merged with others to form a crowd, where, in addition to the spectators and members of the press, there seemed to be a large number of riot police personnel. As I was trying to understand what had happened, I came across a third person who led me to suspect that I had a poor memory: a civilian behind the policemen, probably also a policeman, who looked familiar to me. These successive episodes of not

remembering the past must have been signs of old age, which I found difficult to accept.

Even though our old friend said so, none of us, as his relatives, could have even imagined his decrepit old age. Obviously, his commitment to life was based on an idea that almost sanctified life. Perhaps faith would be more appropriate. Still, I don't think he cared what we thought, he continued.

"The old woman, who had earlier attracted my attention with her expressive and eloquent expression, looked as if she was the leader of her group, but it was someone else who was reading the press release. ‘We come here when everyone else is running to the cemetery for their relatives,’ she said. "We have been sitting here for a long time. The world has heard our voice, this country has not heard our voice. Everyone visits the graves of their loved ones and leaves a carnation. Show us a gravestone. Show it to us so that we can leave our flowers on that grave."

"The journalists called them the “Weekend Mums”. They were members of a non-governmental organisation with almost thirty years of history. They organised sit-ins to search for their relatives who had disappeared in custody and for the perpetrators of unsolved political murders who would probably never be found. What was happening in my consciousness was a transition from the magical atmosphere of the city and the street to the horror

of a dystopian world. Of course, I didn't like it at all. Although it is humourously said that we are a society with a “fish memory”, we probably needed to forget the evil in order to continue living. The thought crossed my mind that those three people, whose identities I could not remember, had been pushed into my subconscious by such a mechanism. And it was true. Accompanied by a bitter feeling, I somehow remembered the woman.

"There are many different kinds of pain that human beings experience in life. But none of them can be compared to the pain a mother feels when she loses her child. And since we cannot put ourselves in her shoes, we can never understand this pain. The people who gathered here were persistently resisting an ideology that had turned into a monster, even though it told them that they could not gain experience.

"Her story was based on one of those events that have become commonplace with more than twenty thousand unsolved murders. However, this number was incomparably larger when compared to the events that were the prelude to the military coup some fifteen years ago. Our three days of life were being used as a tool for dirty political games that disregarded human life. The son, who was taken by the police to be brought back, did not return. The police told the family that he had no record. The body of the woman's son was found by villagers in the woods. His face was made unrecognisable so that he could

not be identified. Although he was buried in the cemetery, he was identified and recognised. However, the perpetrators of the extrajudicial execution could not be found.

"As if by reflex, my eyes searched for the man I had seen behind the policemen. He was not there. I couldn't understand why I had forgotten who he was, even though he was so famous. However, he had been on the public agenda for months. Journalists had interviewed him many times, he had participated in programmes on many TV channels, and he had made satisfactory explanations that had dispelled suspicions. In the words of a famous politician, he had “gone out of the routine”.

"In the name of the spirit of the law, he carried out extrajudicial executions. He was the perfect apparatus of those who put themselves in the place of the state. In his house there were numerous framed certificates of appreciation issued by his superiors after each operation. He was labelled as a hitman by some. The geography he grew up in was the geography of those who devoted themselves to the state like a sacred belief. He was a specially trained “operative”. In order to respond to terrorist activities in the country in a professional manner, a specialised department was established within the police force, just like the special warfare department that existed in the pre-coup army structure. The hitman became one of the legendary names of this department.

Our old friend paused briefly. There was an expression of disappointment on his face, reflecting the mood of the hero with whom he had identified himself.

"He felt strongly that he was left alone in the courts. And he cried out in rebellion. He made incredible outbursts. He saw the prime minister and the interior minister of the time behind all the unlawfulness they were experiencing and declared this openly and loudly. In the following years, the prime minister stayed away from politics as if he wanted to forget the allegations against him. The interior minister, on the other hand, was accused of being the leader of a criminal organisation in the unsolved murders case. His name was also mentioned in other cases of organised crime and corruption. He was tried and convicted on the charges of ‘forming a gang to commit crimes, not informing the competent authorities about persons under arrest and detention warrants and abuse of office’. In the special prison prepared for him, he supposedly served his sentence in order to ease the public conscience. Prisoners were transferred to other prisons and thus he was allocated a private prison. A helipad was built in the garden of this residence and he often had the opportunity to meet private visitors. In this respect, he was reminiscent of the South American mafia leader Escobar. It is likely that the drug lord, who has been a terrorist in his own country, modelled himself on the leader of the organisation on the other side of the world in the construction of his personal prison.

After a short breath, our old friend moved on to someone who played a key role in a rather complex web of events.

"There were those who doubted whether it was really an accident or whether it had been planned. The facts revealed in a road accident confirmed the convictions that had clouded people's minds. Immediately afterwards, as it once did, events came to an abrupt end as if cut with a knife. The public outcry was so great that the government could not remain a bystander, lest the problem be glossed over and covered up. The most prestigious organisation was asked to report on the events. The report prepared by the Intelligence Service, which was criticised for the unqualified personnel it used, was not of a kind that would ease the public conscience. It was criticised that wrong and irrelevant issues were listed, people who had nothing to do with the incident were included in the report and an attempt was made to cover up the incident.

"In response, the prime minister took the initiative and assigned the Prime Ministry Inspection Board and stood behind it. This new report was made public, although many parts of it were kept secret as state secrets. It was deemed satisfactory and it was said “The country is cleaning its bowels”.

At this point our old friend stopped for a moment. He looked thoughtful. ‘This was an opportunity to make some adjustments in the bureaucracy’, he continued.

"In this report prepared by the Mülkiyelis, a cautious language was used. While conveying opinions or messages in a careful, attentive and measured style, exaggeration, expressions that could lead to misunderstandings, or a sharp tone were especially avoided. Each word was carefully chosen to express the point.

"The main idea of the issue was illegal relations and it should have been handled as a whole. However, it was divided into parts, “drowned in details” and the essence and substance of the matter was overlooked, especially at the judicial stage. In fact, the attitude and behaviour of the bureaucracy was problematic. Organisations and administrators were often careful not to provide any assistance to the investigating inspectors under the pretence of an apparent openness and transparency. Working space, secretaries, telephones and vehicles were provided, but there was only reluctance to provide information. In the Ministry of the Interior and the General Directorate of Security it was evident that they were endeavouring to do their part with a show of enthusiasm. In the Ministry of Justice, despite the Minister's instructions, some issues were not examined. What was common to all of them was the careful behaviour of the institutions in forgetting their own shortcomings and blaming others. The soldiers, on the other hand, were completely silent. However, the gendarmerie should have had a lot to say. Politics was not

impartial either. It became unclear whether the problem was a national issue or a government issue. What was the problem? .

"The mafia leader, the woman accompanying him and the police chief were killed in the traffic accident, the only survivor was the MP. Unexplained weapons were found in the boot of the car. This photograph, which brought together politics, the mafia and the police force, was a document of pollution.

‘Over time, the gang issue had developed in two different directions within the borders of the country; firstly, the process of the organised crime syndicates led by Ö. L. T. becoming “mafia” on an international scale and significance, extending to the top levels of the state in foreign countries, and secondly, the groupings that could be called ’the group of the tie-wearers", which brought together educated and respected people, such as bankers, business people, bureaucrats and media representatives, who were not involved in armed activities and the use of force. In both cases, the principle that made grouping and sharing necessary was this. "Be smart. Don't eat alone. Share it. Otherwise, they won't let you eat this profit. They will make you vomit".

"Ö. L. T. had reached the level of infiltrating the bureaucracy and bribing public officials to get work done. However, he was murdered when he had reached the level of giving orders to public officials. Thus, the first

American-type mafiaisation process in the history of the country, which was not afraid of the police, gendarmerie and judiciary, was left unfinished. While ‘Fındıkzadeli, the ’Finishing House Operator" had clearly expressed his preference to liquidate his gambling houses after a while and become an entrepreneur who started making investments, buying factories and even establishing factories, he could not find the opportunity to realise his ideas. The halo around him was large and effective enough to make it unnecessary for him to have a bodyguard, to go out on the streets with three or five cars and to take measures to protect himself. As soon as he realised the unannounced precautions taken by his men, he reacted violently. This choice, which at first glance seemed imprudent, did not lead to his murder. The system that eliminated him was already strong enough to override any precautions.

"The second type of gang activity was the use and organisation of state power and authority itself, which was much more effective than the first. The monetary dimension of the events that took place in the banks exceeded the totality of mafia activities perceived by the public. And it was believed that it would not be inaccurate to recognise bank incidents as the accelerator of general contamination.

"At that time, supervision and regulations regarding the banking sector were quite weak. Issues such

as capital adequacy, risk management and transparency were not sufficiently controlled. Some banks were making decisions that prioritised the personal interests of their shareholders. High-risk investment decisions and misallocations of loans were common. Privileged loans were granted to state-owned banks and some private banks under political pressure. These loans often turned into non-recourse debts and weakened the financial structure of banks.

"What happened when the state paid for the losses incurred as a result of the successful actions in the banking sector by the close circle of the former Prime Minister and the former President, who were photographed with him, was, of course, nothing more than a transfer of wealth.

As if to alleviate the impact of this depressing picture he painted in dark colours, our old friend made a cautious turn that heralded the end of the dark days.

"Undoubtedly, the fog has lifted, the chaotic situation in the bureaucracy has largely disappeared with the measures taken by the parliament. The laws and measures taken regarding the economy have yielded results. The shaken reputation of the intelligence and security services and the bureaucracy in general has also been restored. . Of course, this did not happen immediately.

"A retired intelligence officer with his wife, a prominent lawyer, the partner of the mafia leader killed in the accident, a member of the parliamentary commission investigating the accident, a member of parliament, and others have been victims of a series of mysterious road accidents in connection with the investigation, as if by a cynical and cruel twist of fate. However, those who were in some way close to the criminal world must have thought that they could survive by gaining public visibility through writing books, setting up websites, appearing constantly in newspapers and on TV, so as not to go back to “who shot them”. This person could have been a fraudster who defrauded the prime minister, or a police officer or intelligence officer. We have seen that many people whose names were included in that report had resorted to this method. An official at the top of the country's intelligence realised that he was going to be arrested and defected to a country on the other side of the world. And then, in an unprecedented move, he turned the confidential correspondence of his organisation into a memoir and published it on his website. Later, a police official followed the same path by writing a book and appearing on TV. Twenty-five years later, a mafia leader, repeatedly mentioned in the report, shook the country with his YouTube videos about the government of the day.

One of us asked, as if to draw attention to a deficiency in the picture. So, what was the situation of the Mülkiye in all this chaos? .

It was not easy not to get involved in such pollution, our old friend replied. "However, compared to the previous ones, I think that the visible face of the state, with its governors, district governors and others, was at least as clean as the military.

We were being crushed under the weight that was falling on us. Of course, there was more to be said. Our old friend concluded his story as follows.

"After the press statement at the end of Freedom Street, there was a sudden movement. Before we realised what was going on, it turned into a chaos. The police intervened with pepper spray and shields. Many people, including relatives of the disappeared, human rights defenders, journalists and representatives of political parties were detained. In the meantime, a tragicomic situation, reminiscent of black humour, caught my attention. In that turmoil, as the old woman went to the police car without resisting the riot police officers holding her by the arms, her superiors shouted from a short distance away. ‘Let her go’. ‘No, arrest me too’, she screamed, objecting to the young policemen releasing her.

"Finally, I also remembered the gentlemanly-looking man I had met a little after entering Liberty Street. Twenty years after he had prepared the report, he told a newspaper, with a pessimistic outlook that implied that the country had missed an opportunity, that the press in those days should have pursued the case continuously until

results were obtained. The retired civil servant was satisfied with himself. He had done his part. He was only sad for the country.

"I think there was no remedy for the anguish that gnawed at the special operations soldier's soul. Every moment he breathed, he was haunted by the ghosts of the people whose lives he had ended. It was as if he was with them and he was constantly having nightmares, unable to stop himself from gesticulating in a way that seemed meaningless from the outside.

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